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Colour-symbolism in the troubadour Marcabru and his followers

Richard Goddard

A number of articles and chapters of books exist on different types of colour-symbolism from diverse branches of medieval culture, from both secular and sacred worlds, and from a variety of different regions and different periods. The two most widely-ranging pieces on this subject to date, W. Wackernagel's 'Die Farben- und Blumensprache des Mittelalters'¹ and P. Dronke's 'Tradition and Innovation in medieval Western Colour-Imagery',² respectively take Middle High German and Medieval Latin as their base languages. Wackernagel, the more comprehensive of the two, examines the often contradictory moral and other abstract significances attached, among others, to the colours of hair, the complexion and the humours, to liturgical and lay clothing, to banners and shields, gem-stones and flowers. P. Dronke, more selective and orientated rather towards literature and learning, concentrates his discussion on the purely artistic use of colour (in an Old Irish epic), on the gradual formalisation of certain types of colour-symbolism, such as that in liturgical vestments, heraldic fashion and the twelve stones of the heavenly Jerusalem, and on the imagery of blood and snow in a famous passage in the Perceval/Parzival legend. Neither mentions Occitan literature and culture;³ and no other medieval colour-symbolism which has so far been discussed in print seems to be comparable in choice of colours and meaning with that which I shall illustrate here from the lyric of Marcabru and his successors.

a) *Vair* and *pic* in the satire of Marcabru

Perhaps the most unusual of the moralised colour-terms in the satirical verse of the troubadour Marcabru are the pair *vair* and *pic*. Both words have, as adjectives, two principal areas of meaning in medieval Occitan: an abstract moral sense and a concrete colour one.⁴

Vair, glossed by Levy as 'de couleur changeante; brillant; vair; différent; changeant; inconstant',⁵ seems to have retained both its main senses, 'particoloured or variegated' and 'changeable or fickle in behaviour', from its Latin *etymon varius*.⁶ In our first example of *vair* from a song by Marcabru, his 'Dirai vos en mon lati', the poet plays on both these meanings:⁷

- E. I vilans ditz tras l'araire:
 Bon fruitz eis de bon jardi,
 Et avols fills d'avol maire
 E d'avol caval rossi.
- V 25 Eras naisson dui poilli
 Beill, burden ab saura cri
 Que. is van volven de blanc vaire
 E fan semblan aseni;
 Jois e Jovens n'es trichaire
- 30 E Malvestatz eis d'aqui.

And the churl says across the plough: good fruit comes from a good garden, and a bad son from a bad mother and from a bad stallion a nag.

Now two foals are born, pretty, prancing, with golden hair,
 which steadily turn from white to mottled and look like asses;
 Joy and Youth are cheating and evil is born of this.

This passage is a typically dense attack by Marcabru on one of his most frequent targets, promiscuous aristocrats and their vicious bastard offspring. As the peasant authority suggests, the images of the first four lines stem from vernacular proverbs. The imagery of good and bad fruit occurs in several proverb collections, some of which are attributed to the peasant,⁸ but it is also biblical,⁹ while the third adage crops up as a proverb in Northern French literature.¹⁰ The following strophe is even wider in the possible resonances of its allusions: horses are associated elsewhere in Marcabru with either the aristocracy¹¹ or with sexuality,¹² but here with both; horses are used as symbols of lasciviousness¹³ and asses of the same vice as well as vulgar stupidity¹⁴ in both proverbial and more learned sources; and the picture of the two courtly qualities, *Jois* and *Joven*, cheating on one another and producing the bastard *malvestatz* is a humorous adaptation of the familiar interrelation of these qualities elsewhere in Marcabru,¹⁵ and of the virtues and vices in Latin imitators of Prudentius's

Psychomachia.¹⁶ But how do *vair* and the other colours evoked in these lines fit into this nexus of imagery?

The two foals introduced in the fifth strophe of 'Dirai vos' pick up the horse-image of the previous line, and in the context of the song must represent young nobles. The foals are lively and attractive, with golden manes, the equivalent of the golden hair which is the norm in descriptions of aristocratic beauty in medieval Gallo-Romance literature.¹⁷ They begin by being white, probably referring to the remainder of their colouring, but certainly also referring to their inner purity, before they inevitably become *vair*, a term on whose ambiguity Marcabru plays throughout this passage. The foals/young nobles are 'fickle' like the bad mother, the bad stallion, the ass and the courtly virtues gone awry; and they are 'variegated in colour' or 'mottled' like the ass and the mule (a possible secondary meaning of *burden*),¹⁸ the sterile offspring of the unnatural mating of the noble horse and the lowly ass. (There may even be a tongue-in-cheek learned reminiscence behind the simultaneous moral and physical transmutation of the two noble foals here: Marcabru's contemporary, St. Bernard, reports in his life of St. Malachy the miracle whereby the Irish saint's palfrey changed hue in the opposite direction, from black to white, in recognition of Malachy's exceptional holiness.)¹⁹

In our second example of *vair*, from Marcabru's '*En abriu s'esclair. il riu contra. I Pascor*', the term is again ambivalent, but the context on this occasion is not complicated by explicit equine or asinine imagery:²⁰

II Qui a drut reconogut d'una color
 Blanc lo teigna, puis lo deigna ses brunor;
 C'amors vair'al mieu veiair'a l'usatge trahidor.

If you have ascertained that your lover is of one colour, you should keep him if that colour is white and then give him your love if he is without the stain of treachery.

Vair once again occurs with other colours and is unfavourably contrasted with white. It is not, however, clear whether the addition of brown would render *vair* variegated/mottled like an ass or mule, or particoloured/piebald like some horses. Once again it is also used of fickleness in love, in contrast to the *fin'amors* mentioned by Marcabru in the first line of the song.

The fourth stanza of 'En abriu' introduces our second colour:²¹

- IV Dieus maldiga amor piga e sa valor;
 Per sa lecha pren delech'al bevedor,
 Qui trop beu plus que non deu lo vins li tol la vigor.

May god curse piebald love and its prestige; because of its vice it delights in the drinking-trough: he who drinks more than he should loses his strength through wine.

Pic/piga(f) on its own normally has no metaphorical meaning, only the concrete sense of 'piebald', derived from Latin *pica*, 'a bird-name comprehending the jay and magpie',²² birds, like all the crow family, known for their garrulousness and not their fickleness.²³ Yet *pic* appears here (as in a number of instances from later troubadour lyric) to take on an abstract meaning similar to that of *vair* when the two are juxtaposed.²⁴ Marcabru seems to be playing with two words which can be synonymous or complementary when they both refer to animal hides, but do not usually share a similar moral significance. Perhaps he is jokingly distinguishing a 'variegated' from a 'piebald' love, which both fail to compare with *fin'amors*, or with what Marcabru refers to in another song as *blanch'amistatz*?²⁵ Alternatively the two terms may be meant to be synonymous.

There may be an analogy for such a calquing of another term for an animal pelt on *vair* in its moral sense in a set of mid-twelfth-century Italian misogynistic proverbs, the *Proverbia super natura feminarum*:²⁶

Vardaive de la femene, q'ele son vaire e grise

Beware of women for they are *vair* and *gris* (i.e. fickle).

Gris and *vair* are both varieties of costly fur, often grouped together, as for instance in William IX's famous renunciation of courtly pleasures, his 'Pos de chantar m'es pres talenz':²⁷

Aissi guerpisc joi e deport
 e vair e gris e sembeli.

I have thus abandoned joy and pleasure and *vair* and *gris* and sable.

Gris like *pic* seems not to exist as an abstract moral quality except, as in the examples from Marcabru and the *Proverbia* – but probably not

that from William – when playfully coupled with *vair*. This may have produced an effect not unlike that of Cockney rhyming-slang.

The above quotation from William IX leads me to wonder in concluding this section on *vair* and *pic*, whether these colours and their equine associations may originally have been an encoded form of moral criticism by Marcabru of his aristocratic precursor. The extremely rare verse-form of 'En abriu' is identical to that of three of William's bawdy 'burlesque' songs.²⁸ In two of the latter and in another 'burlesque' song William pictures as horses, respectively, his supposed mistresses, oversexed noblewomen and their churlish custodians and lovers, and himself in the act of intercourse.²⁹ It would be appropriate if Marcabru's satire against sexual abuse among the upper classes derived some of its language from the self-styled epitome of aristocratic philandering of the previous generation of troubadours.

b) *Vert* and *sec* in Alegret, Peire d'Alvernhe and Raimbaut d'Aurenga.

Vert, 'green', and *sec*, 'dry' or 'dried up', also appear at first sight to be a remarkable choice of colour-terms. *Sec* is indeed not really a colour at all, except in so far as it is used by certain contemporaries and followers of Marcabru as an antonym for *vert*, for instance, in the 'Ar resplan la flors enversa' of Raimbaut d'Aurenga:³⁰

Mas mi ten vert e jauzen Joys
Er quan vey secx los dolens croys.

But Joy keeps me green and joyful now that I see the wretched
wicked dried up.

Like *vair* in Marcabru, *vert* here clearly has an abstract moral meaning, but a positive one. Raimbaut's 'greenness', in contrast to the winter opening of the preceding strophe, must suggest spring, vitality, joy and fertility, the normal associations of the spring opening. *Sec*, on the other hand, evokes lack of colour, barrenness, misery and evil. Like *pic*, it is unexpectedly drawn by the ambivalence of its partner into an image-world where natural phenomena, colours and moral abstractions are interwoven.

The complementary moral significances of *vert* and *sec* seem to have been developed in a pair of related satires, one 'Ara pareisson ll'aubre sec', attributed to Marcabru's rival Alegret,³¹ the other, 'Abans que.l blanc pueg sion vert', of uncertain authorship, but possibly

attributable to Peire d'Alvernhe.³² Both songs owe much to Marcabru in subject and diction. 'Ara pareisson' commences with a winter opening and a disconsolate poet; he despairs at the hold which avarice has over the evil, and the decline of Youth, Prowess and Largesse. His only hope is the 'lord of the West', probably Alfonso VII of Castile, emperor of Spain from 1137, who was also approached for patronage by Marcabru.³³ *Sec* is the rhyme-word at the end of the first line of each strophe: it refers to the wintry trees devoid of leaves, to the effect of avarice on men, to trees barren of fruit and flowers, to the evil which has befallen Largesse, and to emptily boasting misers and adulterous husbands.³⁴ Only Alfonso is neither 'flac ni sec' (limp nor dried up).³⁵

'Abans que.l blanc pueg sion vert' is similarly characterised by a regular rhyme-word at the end of the first line of each strophe, but in this case *vert*. It also formally resembles 'Ara pareisson' by employing the unusual rhyme *-ec* (but in the third line of each strophe). Since 'Abans que.l blanc pueg' has very rarely been mentioned in troubadour scholarship and is only available in print buried in the appendix of a now superseded edition of Peire Rogier, I shall quote it in full here:³⁶

- I Abans que.l blanc pueg sion vert,
 ni veiam flor en la sima,
 quan l'auzel son de cantar nec,
 q'us contra.l freg non s'esperta
 5 adoncs vuelh novelhs motz lassar
 d'un vers, qu'entendan li meilhor,
 que.l bes entr.ls nos creis e par.
- II Per so.m plai qu'en temps no vert
 mostre.s vers de rason prima
 10 als valens, cui sabers cossec,
 quar esta gens mal aperta
 non sabon ren, que.is vol levar,
 que sens per nulh doctrinador
 ses bon cor no pot melhurar.
- III 15 Dins es poirida e sembra vert
 un'avol gens que blastima
 tot so qu'àqnc dreitura amec;
 e pus negus no s'acerta;
 dieus, quant pot hom en els blasmar,
 20 qu'anc no i agron l'artelh menor

- mahnt home, a cui augh pretz dar.
 IV Nuls hom del mon non a pretz vert,
 quan vol daurar e pueys lima,
 per qu'es fols sel que.s n'auzec,
 25 pos ve que bes no i reverta;
 qu'a la cocha pot hom proar
 amic de boca ses amor,
 mas don no ves, no esperar.
- V Qui anc vi fresc ioven ni vert
 30 ar es mort per gent cayma,
 que cuja far tot lo mon sec,
 qu'ieu non vey fol ni mamberta,
 qu'us non fassa sofren son par;
 per so frutz torna en peior:
 35 dous semblan ab sabor d'amar.
- VI Ben sap far paisser herba vert
 femna que.l marit encrima
 per son avol fag tener nec;
 d'aqui nays la gens dezerta
 40 de pretz, q'us no.n auza parlar
 mas: de mal frug mala sabor;
 e.lh filh non volon sordeiar.
- VII Aissi naisson sec e non vert,
 q'us d'enjan non repayma;
 45 ni anc, pos dieus Adam formec,
 non tenc sa port'uberta
 bauzia, qu'en fai manhs intrar;
 que lop son tornat li pastor,
 qui degron las fedas gardar.
- VIII 50 Cobeeza a mort pretz vert,
 qu'ensenha.ls baros d'escrima;
 e cobezetatz s'abrazec,
 un'arsors, que es uberta,
 don vezem manht ric abrazar;
 55 pretz cuion traire aul labor,
 mas anc ses dieu no vi pretz car.

Before the white hills turn green and we see blossoms in the tree tops, when the mute birds refrain from singing and not one of them

braves the cold, now I would like to bind together some new words into a *vers* for the better people to hear, since goodness grows and shows itself among the good.

That is why it pleases me in the non-green season that this *vers* with its fine theme should be shown to worthy men whom wisdom follows; for those stupid people know nothing which might help them improve themselves; since a man's good sense cannot be improved by any teacher unless that man has a good heart.

They are rotten within but appear green, an evil people that blames everything that justice ever loved; and since no one else makes so bold; God, there is so much to blame in them that many men to whom I hear nobility attributed do not have so much as a little toe's worth of it!

No man in the world has green nobility if he wishes to gild and then file, since he is a fool who has grown accustomed to do this, although he sees that no good comes of it; for when he is hard-pressed a man can say he is another's friend without any feeling of friendship; but when you see no sign there is no point in hoping.

Anyone who saw fresh and green youth has now been killed by the people of Cain, who would like to make the whole world blind, for I see no fool or madman who does not make his partner suffer, so that the fruit declines; despite its fine appearance it has a bitter flavour.

A wife knows well how to graze green grass when she blames her husband in order to keep her own evil deed quiet; from this are born the people so devoid of nobility that they no longer dare speak: bad fruit has a bad taste, and the sons cannot become any more corrupt.

Thus are the dried up and non-green born, of whom not one desists from deceit; never since God created Adam did treachery hold its door so wide that it makes many enter; the shepherds who ought to be guarding the flocks have turned into wolves.

Covetousness has killed green nobility which teaches the barons to put up a defence; and covetousness has caught on fire with such a conflagration that we see many nobles burn; they think they can gain nobility through evil works, but I never saw dear nobility without God.

Of the thirteen manuscript versions of this song, one ascribes it to Peire Rogier, four to Guiraut de Bornelh, and the remainder to Peire d'Alvernhe. Attribution to Peire Rogier, to whom no satires are positively ascribed and who does not seem to have fallen under the

sway of Marcabru, is unlikely on the strength of one manuscript. Guiraut is a more likely candidate for the authorship of 'Abans que.l blanc pueg'. But the close affinities of the subject-matter and style of this song with Marcabru and Peire d'Alvernhe (see below) suggest to me that Peire is the author. The possibility that it may poke fun at Alegret's song may also speak for Peire's authorship, since he elsewhere parodies Bernart de Ventadorn,³⁷ and mocks an array of contemporary troubadours in his so-called 'Galeria literaria'.³⁸

The exact nature of the evil people in 'Abans que.l blanc pueg' (11, 16 and 30) is only made plain in the second half of the song. They are, as in Marcabru's 'Dirai vos' and the seventh stanza of Alegret's 'Ara pareisson',³⁹ the adulterous husbands and wives of high-born families and their evil fruit. They contribute to the decline of courtly qualities such as *pretz*, 'nobility' (23, 40, 50, 55) and *ioven* (29), a term suggesting generosity among other 'youthful' virtues,⁴⁰ and the resultant rise of such vices as *hauzia*, 'treachery' (47), and *cobeeza*, 'covetousness' (50, 52). In Marcabru, such bestial behaviour calls forth colours such as *vair* and *pic*, with their associations with the pelts of animals. In Alegret, Peire d'Alvernhe and Raimbaut d'Aurenga the sphere of allusion is also that of nature, but of the plant rather than animal kingdom. In the first two strophes of 'Abans que.l blanc pueg', *vert* refers to spring as opposed to winter, but without any obvious moral resonances. In the third and sixth strophes *vert* respectively describes the paradoxically fresh outward appearance of inwardly putrifying sinners, and the grass grazed by adulterous wives. Both of these latter touches may be humorous flourishes, part of a light parody of Alegret's *sec* imagery, and in typical contrast (if the song is by Peire) with the earnest moralising stance of Marcabru. In the remainder of the song, however, *vert* is unequivocally positive: it is associated with Youth (29), which is also terms 'fresh', with Nobility (50), and is contrasted with Alegret's negative term *sec* in line 43. *Sec* is even used of *Joven* by Alegret himself in 'Ara pareisson'.⁴¹

Joven vei fals e flac e sec

I see Youth false and limp and dried up.

Sec is also used to describe love's enemies in a song certainly by Peire d'Alvernhe, his 'Bel m'es qu'ieu fass'ueimais un vers':⁴²

volpillós, blau d'eneveja, sec

cowardly, blue with envy,⁴³ dried up.

This, combined with Peire's use of *vert* in another song (see below), constitutes another, albeit weak, argument for seeing Peire as the author of 'Abans que.l blanc pueg'.

Marcabru had in his satire reacted away from nature, and especially spring as a season of not only love but also lust and the coupling of animals, causing him frequently to invert the spring into a winter opening and denounce the overt sexuality of the spring and summer months.⁴⁴ Alegret, Peire d'Alvernhe and Raimbaut d'Aurenga revert to the more normal troubadour equation, arising from the spring opening, that love and nature, fertility and courtliness are one. Marcabru's followers may be pessimistic when they regret how nature in the form of sexual mores and court patronage has 'dried up', but they are significantly less pessimistic than Marcabru, who goes so far as to equate sexuality with the unnatural and the bestial.

c) *Blanc*, *nier*, *bru* and *bai* in Marcabru and Peire d'Alvernhe
Vair, *pic*, *vert* and *sec* are the more difficult and dynamic of the early troubadour moral colour-terms, which is why I have discussed them first. *Blanc*, 'white', *nier*, 'black', and *bru*, 'brown', may however be termed the 'backbone' of these troubadours' colour-imagery, since these colours more naturally take on moral connotations. We recall, for example, that Marcabru recommends in his 'En abriu' (see above) that one should accept a good lover who is 'white' and 'without the stain of brown'. Later in the same song love is depicted as in decline and turning black:⁴⁵

Enaissi torn'a decli l'amors e torn'en negror.

Thus love goes downhill and turns black.

White and black and brown are generally less complex and more universal in their associations than the other colours, representing an opposition of light and darkness, purity and filth. But their meanings can nevertheless on occasion be complicated through context, especially when this relates them to the other, richer colour-terms.

The fact that white, brown, black and bay (which alliterates with *blanc* and *bru* in Occitan) may be individually comparatively thin on meaning – one might say that they are more purely symbolic than

associative – is perhaps indicated by their frequent appearance in lists together. The following example is from Marcabru's 'L'iverns vai e.l temps s'aizina':⁴⁶

Entrebescan oc e no

Ai!

Tala nier, blanc, brun e bai

Ab 'si farai! no farai!'

Hoc!

Fai al fol magra l'esquina.

Mingling yes with no – Ai! – it (i.e. *Amars* or promiscuous love) destroys the black, white, brown and bay with its 'Yes I'll do it! No I won't' – Yes! – It makes the fool's spine grow thin.

The context is once again an attack on aristocratic promiscuity, illustrated in the following stanza by bestial imagery of the noblewoman as a greyhound mating with a lackey of her household pictured as a common mongrel. Marcabru's moral message is made even more disconcerting in this song through its incongruously flippant dance-type verse-form with exclamatory monosyllabic refrains,⁴⁷ and in the above strophe through the ironic allusion to an Ovidian love-cliché in the last line.⁴⁸ K. Lewent translates the colours in the third line of this passage as 'alle Leute', which is probably an accurate summary of what Marcabru is saying, but plays down the troubadour's colour-imagery. The grouping of 'black' and 'white', and 'brown' and 'bay' may refer here to the good and bad, and the averagely bad, as all doomed if they become involved with *Amars*. The use of *perdicio*, 'perdition', in line 31 of the song, of fire imagery in lines 22 and 56, and the explicit eschatological significance of 'los blanc e.ls brus' in a religious song by Peire d'Alvernhe (see below) would all strengthen this interpretation. Whether or not this is so, 'nier, blanc, brun e bai' may also mean 'all people' in the sense of people of every colouring and especially (as Lewent suggests) of every hair-colouring. This is, for instance, the primary concrete meaning of 'brun ni bai' in Marcabru's *tenso* with Uc Catola, 'Amics Marchabrun, car digam'.⁴⁹

In the debate-song, 'Amics Marchabrun', the noble lover Uc takes the side of love while Marcabru does his utmost to persuade him that love is treacherous. The tenth strophe of the song takes the form of a *sententia cum auctoritate* from Ovid which, as J.J. Wilhelm has realised, is an adaptation of *Amores* II. 4, 39-44:⁵⁰

Catola, Ovides mostra chai,
 e l'ambladura o retrai,
 que no soana brun ni bai,
 anz se trai plus aus achiaiz.

Catola, Ovid shows here, and the facts confirm the point that it (i.e. *Amors*) despises neither brown nor chestnut, but only prefers the degenerate.

The corresponding passage in Ovid is as follows (translation by Christopher Marlowe):⁵¹

Candida me capiet, capiet me flava puella
 est etiam in fusco grata colore venus.
 Seu pendent nivea pulli cervice capilli,
 Leda fuit nigra conspicienda coma,
 seu flavent, placuit croceis aurora capillis:
 omnibus historiis se meus aptat amor.

A white wench thralls me, so doth golden yellow;/and nut-brown girls in doing have no fellow./If her white neck be shadowed with black hair,/why, so was Leda's, yet was Leda fair./Amber-tressed is she? then on the morn think I;/My love alludes to every history.

Marcabru borrows imagery from the medieval champion of love, yet not to bolster *fin'amors*, but in order to prove that love is no lofty thing, but fickle and self-seeking. The two particular hair-colours which Marcabru chooses from Ovid's selection are significantly not only shades of brown, which has evil associations elsewhere in his verse, but specifically *bai*, which like Latin *badius*, most commonly denotes the colour of horses' coats.⁵² The troubadour thus adapts his learned apparatus to blend with his own colour-symbolism, including its background in animal and especially equine imagery.

Bai is contrasted with *blanc* in a love-song by Peire d'Alverne, his 'Rossinol, al seu repaire'. Yet although the imagery is at face value redolent of Marcabru's, its purpose in Peire is quite different:⁵³

que tost chai
 blancs en bai
 cum flors sobre lenha
 a val mai

qui.l fag fai
ans qu'als la'n destrenha.

... because white soon dwindles to brown (or 'falls on chestnut') like a flower on a tree, she is worth more if she does the deed rather than is forced to do it.

Peire's first complete editor, R. Zenker, believed *blanc* and *bai* to refer to hair;⁵⁴ whereas A. Del Monte, his more recent editor, following M. de Riquer, prefers to see them as morally symbolic.⁵⁵ Both are probably partially correct. Peire may indeed be picturing the flight of time in terms of white specks on dark hair - that is, I think one's first impression - but he seems to combine this with a symbolic exposé of the moral threat to courtly virtue posed by unnecessary prevarication, and complicates his image further by adding the simile of the white flower either fading on the tree or perhaps viewed against the bark, or fallen against the dark ground. Peire borrows Marcabru's ambivalence, but tailors it to a more conventional lyric end.

Peire varies Marcabru's colour-imagery on two further occasions. In his 'Al dessebrar del país', a farewell to earthly love, he lists Marcabru's colours, but characteristically adds *vert* to them. The significance of the terms may be moral, but it is again difficult to pin them down:⁵⁶

qu"ara..m sent de totz assays
vertz e blancs e brus e bays,
e m'albir
e dic vos ...

... for I now feel green and white and brown and bay, and I think and tell you ...

It is possible that the poet-persona, disillusioned with love, is weighing up his own blamelessness ('vertz e blancs') or fault ('brus e bais'), but it is more likely that, 'rejoicing in love's bitterness' (V. 34), Peire is expressing the confusion of his feelings through this mixture of colour-words. The troubadour once again borrows from Marcabru, but bends the latter's imagery to an non-satirical poetic end.

Our final example of Peire d'Alvernhe's refreshing, if diffuse

adaptations of Marcabru's colours occurs in the eschatological *envoi* to the hymn 'Lauzatz si 'Emmanuel':⁵⁷

Pus lo segle er confus,
per iutjar los blancs e ls bruns;
aqueh prec ieu que m'escus
e mon cor e m'arma. I do.

Since the world will be confounded, so that the white and brown may be judged, I pray this man (i.e. Jesus Christ) that he forgive me, and I give my heart and soul to him.

The separation of 'the brown' from 'the white' at the final judgement sounds as if it might be biblical or exegetical, but it does not seem to be. Del Monte notes on the passage from Peire's 'Rossinhol' quoted above,⁵⁸ that *candidus* and *fuscus* are given tropological interpretations in medieval exegesis, but this generally happens when biblical commentators are faced with puzzling occurrences of the words, as in Cant. 1.1.⁵⁹ They do not seem to be used spontaneously as moral terms, much less together as such, still less in relation to the day of reckoning. Peire is therefore probably employing a commonplace form of imagery from contemporary courtly satire, which in its new context paradoxically bestows a pseudo-religious air on the language of vernacular prayer. Such deviant uses of Marcabru's colour-words are not a perversion of their original function and associations, but a continuation of his own experiments. No other imitator of Marcabru used his colour-symbolism either so frequently or so boldly.

d) The decline of colour-symbolism in the third generation of *trobar*. This final section aims to illustrate the decline of the richly associative colour-imagery of Marcabru and Peire d'Alverne in the so-called 'classic' period of *trobar* in the second half of the twelfth century. The poets of this period seem to have gone to two different extremes in their imitation of Marcabru's and Peire's style: either pastiche, or, as more often, the adoption of its least startling and ingenious elements.

Of Marcabru's followers, Raimbaut d'Aurenga is among those who come closest to pure pastiche. Lines 14-15 of his 'Cars, douz e fenh del bederesc' are a case in point:⁶⁰

... que.l blanc-vaire
 Fai fals'amistat picvaira

... because the one who goes from white to vair brings about a false friendship which is vair and piebald.

The interpretation of the terms, *blanc-vaire* as someone who may appear to be good but reveals himself as false, and of *picvaira* as a love which is totally unreliable, presupposes knowledge of, respectively, Marcabru's 'Dirai vos', strophe V, and his 'En abriu', strophes II and IV. Indeed, they not only presuppose such knowledge, but are so obscure in context, in a song consisting of almost incomprehensible pseudo-Marcabrunian imagery, that they may be instances of parody rather than pastiche of Marcabru. Both terms are in addition compounds, a favourite stylistic trick of the older troubadour.⁶¹ Pattison places Raimbaut's song at the beginning of his edition with other putative early works, but 'Cars, douz e fenh' may rather be an example of mature imitative bravado.

The works of Raimbaut's contemporaries, the seldom mentioned Arnaut de Tintinhac, and 'the master of the troubadours', Guiraut de Bornelh, afford more typical indications of the lasting legacy of Marcabru's symbols. Both troubadours tend to use the least 'associative' colours, *blanc* and *bru*, but do occasionally employ *bai* and *vert*.. The greatest difference between their colours and Marcabru's is that Arnaut and Guiraut generally refer to mental or physical well-being rather than moral fibre.

Arnaut seems to stand marginally closer to Marcabru than Guiraut in his colour-imagery, although Arnaut's songs are amorous in subject. Lines 43-47 of his 'Molt dezir l'aura doussana' illustrate this curiously contaminated style:⁶²

S'aquest jois fluris e grana,
 ja mais non dei esser marritz,
 quar sobre totz m'es abelitz
 e non tanh si brus ni bais,
 que dins lo cor mi blanqueja.

If this joy flowers and fruits, I must not be sad any more, since I am more fortunate than anyone and must not be brown or bay, because

my heart grows white.

The principal meaning of the colours here relates to sadness and joy, but they do have some courtly moral overtones: it is the poet's duty to be joyful because he is in love. This is the optimistic and conformist courtly morality of the writers of troubadour love-lyric, in stark contrast to Marcabru's anger and confusion born of disappointed observation.

Whether the following phrases from Guiraut de Bornelh are simple expressions of feeling or also contain a residual 'joy of love' ethic is debatable:⁶³

Car vos m'etz un pauc escucha
Si que.m viratz en bru blanc?

Why have you pushed me to the side, so that you turn me from white to brown?

Plus abruzitz d'un convers

More miserable than a lay brother.

Mas en sonh volh reverdir
Que.m te trist e gai

But I am concerned that what keeps me sad and gay should grow green again.

In all three songs the context is of success or misery in love. In all three the colour-imagery is probably comprehensible without reference to the symbolism of Marcabru and Peire d'Alvernhe. Yet it seems to me that these phrases nevertheless betray the lingering influence of the moralised colour-terms of the satirists of the second generation of troubadours.

e) Conclusion

The evolution and decline of an original form of colour-symbolism in the troubadours of the central fifty years of the twelfth century present virtually a history in miniature of the poetic relations between Marcabru, his contemporaries and followers. The earnest, inventive and eclectic satirist Marcabru seems to have developed a moral colour-symbolism based on the universal significances of white as positive

and black and brown as negative. To these he added *vair*, *pic* and *bai*: *vair* is the name of a fur, but also means 'variegated/particoloured' and figuratively 'fickle'; *pic* properly means 'piebald' or 'particoloured', but in conjunction with *vair* also seems to mean 'fickle'; while *bai* signifies 'bay' or 'chestnut', or is metaphorically negative like its frequent alliterative partner *bru*, 'brown'. The troubadour plays on the ambivalence of each of *vair*, *pic* and *bai* as moral terms and as colours of animal (especially horse and ass) hides, or hair-colours. Alegret and the author of 'Abans que.l blanc pueg sion vert' (perhaps Peire d'Alvernhe) seem to have introduced another pair of 'colours', *vert*, 'green', and *sec*, 'dried up'. Instead of alluding to colour of hide or hair, these terms evoke the more conventional troubadour contrasting of spring, fertility and joy with winter, sterility and sadness. Peire d'Alvernhe continued to use almost all the colours mentioned, but in a variety of new ways in satire, love-lyric and vernacular hymn. The decline of this colour-symbolism then manifested itself in the third quarter of the twelfth century in two principal ways: the more characteristic terms, *vert*, *sec*, *vair* and *pic*, are employed by Raimbaut d'Aurenga, but in a spirit of imitation, arguably pastiche or parody, rather than of renewal; while the least characteristic terms, such as *blanc* and *bru*, continued to be used, for instance by Arnaut de Tintinhac and Guiraut de Bornelh, but no longer with any definitely ascertainable moral significance.

Notes

- ¹ Kleinere Schriften I, Leipzig 1872, pp.143-240.
- ² *Eranos* 41, 1972, 51-107; q.v. for further, general bibliography.
- ³ There is an article on colour-coding in the dress of fashionable men in Spain from the mid-sixteenth century by H. Kenyon, 'Colour-symbolism in early Spanish ballads', *Romanic Review* 6, 1915, 327-40. Dronke contrasts this with colour-coding in medieval German dress, 'Tradition', 71.
- ⁴ F. Raynouard, *Lexique roman*, Paris 1838-44, vol. IV, p. 537 and V, p. 459-60; E. Levy, *Provenzalisches Supplement-Wörterbuch*, Leipzig 1894-1924, vol. VIII, pp. 558-60.

- ⁵ *Petit dictionnaire provençal-français*, Heidelberg 1973, p. 376.
- ⁶ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, Oxford 1968-82, p. 2013 (OLD).
- ⁷ J.-M.-L. Dejeanne, *Poésies complètes du troubadour Marcabru*, Toulouse 1909, pp. 72-3, song XVII, vv. 21-30.
- ⁸ J. Morawski, *Proverbes français antérieurs au XVe siècle*, Paris, 1925, pp. 11, 19, 29, 44, nos. 289, 520, 799, 1201. No. 1201 hails from a collection called *Proverbia rusticorum* and no. 799 from the poem *Li respit del curteis e del vilain* (see Morawski, *Proverbes*, pp. vii and ix).
- ⁹ e.g. Mat. 7. 17; cf. Mat. 3. 10, Lc. 6. 43-4.
- ¹⁰ e.g. *The Medieval French Romance of Alexander*, ed. E. Armstrong et al., vol. II (Princeton, 1937), 357, vv. 1657-66.
- ¹¹ e.g. the Arab stallion in 'Assatz m'es bel del temps essuig', song VIII, v. 38 (Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 34).
- ¹² Love is like a mare on heat in 'Dirai vos senes duptansa', song XVIII, str. ix (Dejeanne, *Poésies*, pp. 81-82).
- ¹³ e.g. in the possibly Venetian *Proverbia super natura feminarum*, ed. G. Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, Naples, 1961, vol. I, pp. 521-55, vv. 413-16 and 453-54, and in the Old French debate-poem *De Marco e de Salemon*, ed. J. Méon, *Nouveau recueil de fabliaux et de contes inédits*, Paris 1823, vol. I, pp. 416-34, str. 15-6, 33-4, 55-6; *Pliny. Natural History*, ed. H. Rackham, London/Cambridge (Mass.) 1938-62, vol. III, lib. VIII, xlvi, 108, and Pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor, *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, Migne, *PL* 177, 13-164 (co. 93).
- ¹⁴ e.g. in Morawski, *Proverbes*, p. 54, no. 1494; *Pliny*, ed. Rackham, vol. III, p. 79, VIII, xlvi, 108, and Pseudo-Hugh of St. Victor, *De bestiis*, *PL* 177, co. 62; and the image in Marcabru's 'Pois l'inverns d'ogan es anatz', song XXXIX, vv. 54-56 (Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 194) from an Aesopian fable (see D. Nelson 'Animal Imagery in Marcabru's poetry', *Studies in Medieval Culture* 11, 1975, 51-55 (p.52)).
- ¹⁵ e.g. in 'Al son desviat, chanteire', str. VII (Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 21).
- ¹⁶ See D. Scheludko, 'Klagen über den Verfall der Welt bei den Troubadors. Allegorische Darstellungen des Kampfes der Tugenden und der Laster', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 44, 1943, 22-45 (especially pp. 27 (Prudentius), 28 (Isidore and Gregory the Great), 28-9 (Theodulf of Orleans) and 34 (Marcabru)).
- ¹⁷ e.g. Camilla and Pallas in *Eneas. Roman du XIIe siècle*, ed. J.-J. Salverda de Grave, Paris 1925-29, vol. I, p. 122, v. 4009 and II, p. 15, v. 6385; or *Sämtliche Lieder des Trobadors Giraut de Bornelh*, ed. A. Kolsen, vol. I, Halle 1910, p. 368, song LVII, v. 18. For the prizing of *sor* as a horse-colour, see *Le roman de Thèbes*, ed. G. Raynaud de Lage, Paris 1968, p. 57, v. 1821.

- ¹⁸ L.M. Paterson, *Troubadours and Love*, Oxford 1975, p. 35.
- ¹⁹ *S. Bernardi abbatiss liber de vita et rebus gestis S. Malachiae Hiberniae episcopi*, in *PL* 182, 1073-1118 (co. 1094).
- ²⁰ Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 115, song XXIV, str. II vv. 4-6.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116, str. IV vv. 10-12.
- ²² *OLD*, p. 1377.
- ²³ See e.g. Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. Rackham, vol. III, pp. 368-73, lib. X, lix-lx, 118-24.
- ²⁴ Raynourd, *Lexique*, IV, p. 537.
- ²⁵ 'Al son desviat, chantaire', song V, v. 14 (Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 19); *fin amors* occurs in v. 38 of the same song.
- ²⁶ Contini, *Poeti*, I, p. 528, v. 120.
- ²⁷ N. Pasero, *Guglielmo IX d'Aquitania: Poesie*, Modena 1973, p. 280, song XI, vv. 41-42.
- ²⁸ Pasero, *Guglielmo IX*, pp. 5-155, nos. 1-5. Termed 'burlesques' by L.T. Topsfield, 'The burlesque poetry of Guilhem IX of Aquitaine', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 69, 1968, 280-302.
- ²⁹ Pasero, *Guglielmo IX*, songs I, *passim*, II, vv. 6, 18, and V. vv. 81-82.
- ³⁰ W.T. Pattison, *The Life and Works of the Troubadour Raimbaut d'Orange*, Minneapolis 1952, p. 199, song XXXIX, vv. 8-9.
- ³¹ A. Jeanroy, *Jongleurs et troubadours gascons des XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, Paris 1923, pp. 6-11.
- ³² C. Appel, *Das Leben und die Lieder des Trobadors Peire Rogier*, Berlin 1882, pp. 97-100.
- ³³ A. Roncaglia, 'I due sirventesi di Marcabruno ad Alfonso VII', *Cultura Neolatina* 10, 1950, 157-83. Alegret is the addressee and victim of Marcabru's 'Bel m'es quan la rana chanta' (Dejeanne, *Poésies*, pp. 42-48, no. XI).
- ³⁴ Manuscript M. version, vv. 1, 8, 22, 29, 43.
- ³⁵ MS M, v. 36.
- ³⁶ Appel's excellent edition is printed without alteration. The literal translation is my own, except for v. 15, whose interpretation I owe to Dr L.M. Paterson of Warwick University.
- ³⁷ R. Lejeune, 'Thèmes communs de troubadours et vie de société', *Actes du 3ème Congrès international de langue et littérature du Midi de la France*, Aix-en-Provence 1961, pp. 75-88 (especially 80-88).
- ³⁸ A. Del Monte, *Peire d'Alvernia: Liriche; testo, traduzione, e note*, Turin 1955, song XII, pp. 118-34.
- ³⁹ MS M version; str. IV in MS C.

- 40 G. Cropp, *Le vocabulaire courtois des troubadours de l'époque classique*, Geneva 1975, pp. 413-21 (especially 421).
- 41 MS M version, v. 15.
- 42 Del Monte, *Peire d'Alvernha*, p. 152, song XV, v. 38.
- 43 It may be a coincidence or a south-western European cultural survival that blue is also used to express envy in later medieval Spanish ballads, Kenyon, 'Colour-symbolism', p. 330.
- 44 e.g. in his 'Pois la fuoilla reviroila', Dejeanne, *Poésies*, pp. 184-90, song XXXVIII, especially str. I-III.
- 45 Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 117, song XXIV, v. 21.
- 46 K. Lewent, 'Beiträge zum Verständnis der Lieder Marcabrus', *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 37, 1913, 317-37, 427-51 (see p. 435); cf. Dejeanne, *Poésies*, p. 147, song XXXI, vv. 40-5.
- 47 See H. Spanke's definition of the rondeau in his *Untersuchungen über die Ursprünge des altprovenzalischen Minnesangs. II. Marcabrustudien*, Göttingen 1940, (*Abhandlungen der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, philologisch-historische Klasse, N.F. III, no. 24), p. 21.
- 48 cf. Ovid, *Amores*, I. 6, 5-6, ed. E.J. Kenney, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Amores, Medicamina faciei femininae. Ars amatoria. Remedia amoris*, Oxford 1961, p. 13.
- 49 A. Roncaglia, 'La tenzone tra Ugo Catola e Marcabruno', *Linguistica e filologica. Omaggio a Benvenuto Terracina*, ed. C. Segre, Milan 1968, pp. 203-54 (see 215).
- 50 *Seven Troubadours: the Creators of Modern Verse*, Pennsylvania State University 1970, pp. 77-78. Roncaglia indicates the source as *Ars amatoria*, I. 767ff., 'La tenzone', p. 241.
- 51 Kenney, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Amores*, p. 40; C. Marlowe, *The complete Poems and Translations*, Harmondsworth 1979, pp. 141-42.
- 52 OLD, p. 223; Raynouard, *Lexique roman*, II, p. 168.
- 53 Del Monte, *Peire d'Alvernha*, pp. 19-20, song I, vv. 55-60.
- 54 *Die Lieder Peires von Auvergne, kritische herausgegeben mit Einleitung, übersetzung, Kommentar, und Glossar*, Erlangen 1900, p. 163, 'denn schnell fällt weiss auf blond, wie die Blüte am Baum'.
- 55 Del Monte, *Peire d'Alvernha*, pp. 25-26; M. de Riquer, *La lirica de los trovadores*, vol. I, Barcelona 1948, p. 194.
- 56 Del Monte, *Peire d'Alvernha*, p. 29, song II, vv. 35-38.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 195, song XIX, vv. 64-67.
- 58 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- 59 'Nigra sum, sed formosa, filiae Jerusalem'.

- ⁶⁰ Pattison, *The Life and Works*, p. 65, song I.
- ⁶¹ S. Méjean, 'Les mots composés chez Marcabru et Raimbaut d'Orange', *Mélanges de linguistique et de philologie romane dédiés à la mémoire de Pierre Fouché (1891-1967)*, Paris 1970, ed. G. Matoré/ J. Cadiot-Cueilleron, pp. 93-107 (especially 101).
- ⁶² J. Mouzat, *Le Troubadour Arnaut de Tintinhac*, Tulle, undated, p. 23. Mouzat notes (p. 24), 'Le sens de ces couleurs n'est pas très net'.
- ⁶³ Kolsen, *Sämtliche Lieder*, I. pp. 90, 172, 310, songs XVIII, vv. 9- 10, XXX, v. 56, XLIX, vv. 28-9.